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THE DENTAL ACCESS GAP

Findings from a National Survey

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Conducted by
Lake Research Partners

For
W.K. Kellogg Foundation

INTRODUCTION

On the heels of a July 2011 report released by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) on oral health and dental care, “Improving Access to Oral Health Care for Vulnerable and Underserved Populations,” the W. K. Kellogg Foundation sponsored this national survey of adults. The IOM report characterized this time period as a “transformative moment in the nation’s healthcare system” and an opportunity to explore new approaches to addressing dental access problems. This survey seeks to add a public voice to this discussion and consideration of new solutions.

According to the report, millions of Americans do not receive needed dental care services due to “persistent and systemic” barriers that limit their access to oral health care. The report stresses the link between overall health and good oral health and the risk of infection and serious illness when oral health needs are not met. The high cost of dental services, a shortage of dentists in communities across the country, and a lack of dental insurance coverage are among the main barriers to receiving dental care. Children, Medicaid beneficiaries, ethnic and racial minorities, and individuals living in rural communities are among those who face significant barriers to dental care.

Lake Research Partners conducted this survey of 1,023 adults (aged 18 years or older) nationwide. This report presents an overview of the methodology and key findings of the survey.

Key Findings

Among the key findings are the following:

- Four-in-ten (41%) survey respondents report that they have put off dental care in the last twelve months due to costs. Individuals with incomes less than \$30,000, Latinos, those who lack dental insurance, and those with a high school diploma or less are among the most likely to put off dental care due to costs. Women are also more likely than men to put off dental care because of concerns about costs (47% vs. 35%).
- Thirty percent (30%) of survey respondents report that they do not have a place to receive regular dental care.
- More than eight-in-ten (84%) think that it is a problem that so many Americans cannot afford dental care.
- Most survey respondents (82%) believe it is “very” or “somewhat hard” for people to get free or low-cost dental care in their communities.

- More than three-quarters of respondents (78%) support a new effort to train a new dental provider – a *licensed dental practitioner* – to work under the supervision of dentists to provide preventive, routine care to people without regular access to care.

Methodology

Lake Research Partners designed the survey instrument and conducted the analysis contained in this report. Knowledge Networks fielded the survey. The survey was conducted nationally among a total of n=1,023 adults (aged 18 and older) from July 12-18, 2011. Using the standard 95% level of confidence, the margin of error for proportions based on the entire sample (n=1,023) is ± 3.1 percentage points.

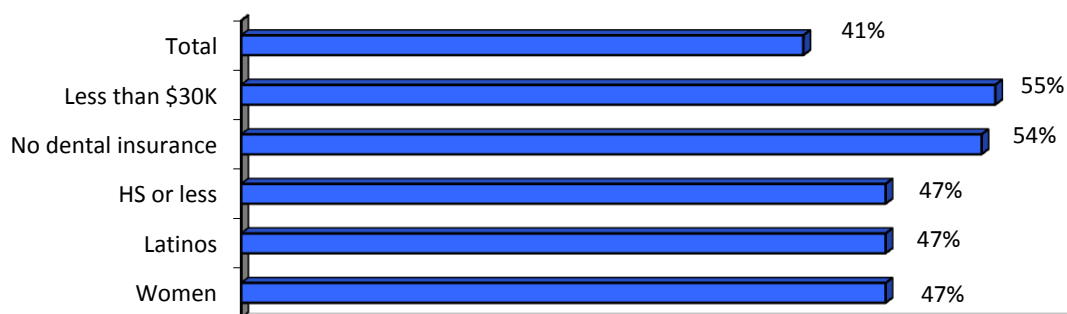
The survey was administered using Knowledge Networks' online panel. Part of this online panel was recruited through random digit dialing (RDD) sampling which was previously Knowledge Networks' primary sampling technique. Since 2009, all additions to the panel have been recruited using addressed-based sampling (ABS) which is estimated to cover 97% of all U.S. households. For those who need it, Knowledge Networks provides a laptop and Internet access to participate on their panel. The resulting panel is probability-based and designed to be representative of the U.S.

DETAILED FINDINGS

Affordability Is a Barrier to Dental Care

Forty-one percent (41%) of survey respondents report that they or someone in their household has put off dental care in the last twelve months because of cost (see Figure 1). Among the respondents most likely to report putting off dental care due to costs are those with annual incomes of less than \$30,000 (55%), those without dental insurance (54%), and those with a high school diploma or less (47%). In addition, Latinos (47%) are more likely than African Americans (36%) and Whites (42%) to have put off dental care in the last twelve months due to costs. Women are also more likely than men (47% vs. 35%) to have put off dental care because of costs.

Figure 1: In the past twelve months, have you or anyone in your household put off dental care because of cost?
Percent reporting “yes”



Most respondents seem aware of the fact that many Americans cannot afford dental care and think it is a problem. More specifically, 84% of survey respondents believe that the number of people who cannot afford dental care is either a major problem (53%) or somewhat of a problem (31%). Only 9% feel this is not a problem.

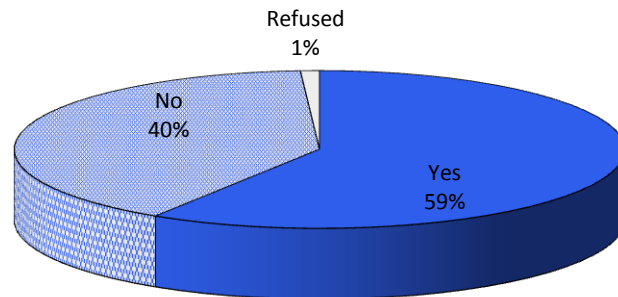
Respondents also recognize access to affordable dental providers as a problem. More than eight-in-ten respondents (82%) believe it is very (37%) or somewhat hard (45%) for people to get free or low-cost dental care in the communities where they live. Far fewer (18%) believe it is easy to get free or low-cost dental care in their communities.

Most Americans Value Regular Dental Care, but Four-in-Ten Lack Dental Insurance

When asked how important receiving regular dental care is to them personally, almost eight-in-ten (79%) survey respondents say it is either very or somewhat important. Only 11% said it is not important.

Despite being important to the vast majority, 40% of survey respondents report that they do not have dental coverage right now. See Figure 2.

Figure 2: Do you happen to have dental insurance right now?
n=1,023



Socio-economic factors like age, race, education, and where one lives matter when it comes to the likelihood of having dental insurance coverage. For example, nearly two-thirds (65%) of respondents with incomes of less than \$30,000 do not have dental insurance. Those living in the West South Central region (Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas) (63%) and individuals aged 65 and older (61%) also have high rates of no dental insurance. Additionally, Latinos (54%) are more likely than African Americans (31%) and Whites (40%) to say they lack dental insurance. Finally, those with a high school diploma or less are more likely to say they lack dental coverage (52%) than those with higher levels of education.

Many Americans Have Nowhere to Go for Regular Dental Care

Nearly one-third of the survey respondents do not have access to a regular dental care provider. Indeed, 30% report that they do not have a place where they receive regular dental care. Another 69% report that they do have a place where they receive regular dental care.

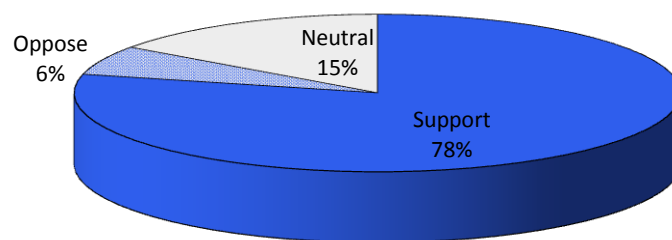
Those most likely to not have a place where they receive regular dental care include those with incomes of less than \$30,000 (59%), those who lack dental insurance (55%), and those who have a high school diploma or less (45%). Latinos (41%) and African Americans (38%) are much more likely than Whites (28%) to report that they have no place to get regular dental care. Finally, those in the West South Central region (Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas) (43%) are more likely than those in other regions to say they lack a place to go for dental care.

Most Americans Support Dental Therapy as One Way to Help Address the Dental Gap

Survey respondents were asked about a new approach, “dental therapy,” to making dental care more accessible. In response to a limited description of this approach, 78% of respondents say they would support the training of “licensed dental practitioners” to provide preventive, routine dental care to people without regular access to care. See Figure 3.

Figure 3: Many efforts are going on to improve affordable access to dental care in our country. One effort is training licensed dental practitioners to provide preventive, routine dental care to people who are going without care. Would you support or oppose this effort to train licensed dental practitioners?

n=1,023



The survey results indicate that the top reason respondents support dental therapy is to prevent the range of problems that can occur when people do not have access to routine dental care. More specifically, 71% of respondents say the following is an important reason to have more licensed dental practitioners: “Without dental care, many adults and children live in pain, miss school or work, and in extreme cases, face life-threatening emergencies. All of this could be prevented if we improved access to routine dental care.”

Conclusion

As the country continues to grapple with ways to improve health care and expand health care coverage, it is essential to highlight the importance of dental care in the overall health care equation. As the IOM report states, it is a “transformative moment” in health care and a time to consider new approaches and to close access gaps.

While not often in the spotlight, millions of American adults and children lack access to preventive, routine dental care. This survey shows that the American public is aware of

this gap in dental care. Furthermore, the survey shows that they are concerned about it. Indeed, many of the survey respondents have been personally impacted by the high cost of dental care and have put off treatment as a result. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that so many are open to new ideas to making dental care more accessible.

One idea explored in the survey is expanding the traditional dental team to include a role for “licensed dental practitioners.” More than seven in ten respondents support this idea. The support seems driven by a recognition of the need to expand access to preventive and routine dental services. Qualitative research done in conjunction with this survey reveals that many people see preventive dental care as leading to better outcomes for individuals’ health and to overall cost savings in the health care system. Also, many view the idea of creating a mid-level dental provider, a licensed dental practitioner, as a practical, common sense approach to the access problem.

While dental therapy is a new idea to most people, licensed dental practitioners have been providing routine dental care in Alaska since 2005 and in over 50 countries for nearly a century. Licensed dental practitioners work under the supervision of dentists in locations where there is less access to dental care. They receive 3,000 hours of training to provide routine care like cleanings and fillings. A number of states are currently considering legislation that would allow for the training of licensed dental therapists. The findings from this survey suggest that such legislation would have public appeal.